

Harry woke up with a start, only to find himself in his room surrounded by darkness in Grimmauld Place. He let out a sigh of relief, realising it was just a dream. He had a dream about the countless men and the number of Giants he had killed, which was disturbing his mind. Putting his head in his hands, Harry felt like a migraine was slowly taking root. Blindly reaching out with his hand, Harry searched the nightstand for a minute until he finally found the cigarette pack and his wand. Lighting a small fire, he lit the cigarette and breathed in the smoke. The warmth it provided temporarily distracted him, and after a few puffs, Harry felt the migraine lessen.

Knowing that he would not get much sleep, Harry took his glasses from the nightstand, and he was just about to walk out of the room when he heard a noise from the ground floor. Harry became instantly alert at the possibility of an intruder in his home. He silenced his feet and soundlessly snuck out of his room with his wand at the ready. He slowly made his way down the stairs and was just about ready to greet the intruder with a stunning spell to the face when he came across familiar-looking pink hair.

“Tonks?” Harry looked surprised to see the auror looking dishevelled and half-dead.

“Hey, Harry.” Tonks groaned from the table where she had her head resting.

“Kreacher.”

“Young master called Kreacher.” The old house elf asked once he popped into existence right behind Harry.

“Please light the lamps, Kreacher.” Harry ordered.

As Kreacher began lighting up the lamps, Harry sat across from Tonks.

“You look like you’re in a tough spot. You need something to eat or drink?” Harry asked, looking at Tonks, who had yet to raise her head from the table.

“No.” she groaned.

“Kreacher, bring a vial of the sleeping potion from Sirius’ stash.” Harry ordered.

The house elf popped away and returned immediately with a vial of viscous fluid in hand. After leaving the potion with Harry, Kreacher popped away.

“Here.” Harry offered the vial to Tonks. “It should help with your sleep.”

“No.” Tonks groaned. “I have to go tomorrow.”

“Actually, it’s four o’clock in the morning. So technically, you should be saying...” Harry trailed off when he received a dirty look from Tonks. “Never mind.”

“Is that a ciggie?” Tonks asked, looking at the cigarette hanging from his mouth.

Tonks snatched it away from his mouth in the blink of an eye.

“Hey!” Harry protested, but Tonks paid it no mind.

Instead, she took a puff from the cigarette and breathed a cloud of smoke before succumbing to several coughs. But Tonks didn't give up. She continued to brave the smoke from the cigarette and managed to do so without coughing.

"You shouldn't smoke. It's bad for your health, Harry." said Tonks, giving Harry free advice while doing quite the contrary to the spirit of her own advice.

"You should take your own advice." Harry told her with an annoyed look.

"Why are you awake at this hour?" Tonks asked, vanishing the remaining cigarette with her wand, making Harry more annoyed.

"Nightmare." Harry answered, taking another cigarette from his pocket and lighting it up.

"What about you? Why were you so late?"

Tonks looked a bit hesitant for a moment.

"Oh, what the hell. It's going to be in the Prophet tomorrow anyway." Tonks muttered to herself.

"Azkaban was attacked by the Dark Lord last night. He freed his Death Eaters from prison with the aid of Dementors. The entire Ministry is in an uproar and running around in panic. No doubt, the DMLE is going to get the blame." Tonks groaned, placing her head back against the table.

Harry chose not to point out that it was the duty of the DMLE to safeguard Azkaban. But that was spilt milk under the bridge and not helpful for Tonks. He wondered when the DMLE would find out about the incident with the Giants and the dead Death Eaters he left in the mountains of Northern Wales. If the Muggles were the first to notice the smoking mountains near Snowdon, then the Ministry would have another crisis on their hand with a lot of Obliviators on the field.

"Come on, Tonks. I'll help you to your bed. Two drops of the sleeping potion should help you sleep off your weariness. I'll call you when it's time for you to report to the Ministry." said Harry, going around the table and helping Tonks to her feet.

Harry managed to help Tonks into her room and tucked her into the bed. He also ensured she was asleep with two drops of the sleeping potion. Closing the door behind him, Harry allowed Tonks to take some much-needed rest for the next few hours. Harry thought about going back to sleep but thought better of it. Instead, he chose to spend the rest of the morning in the library, doing some research into the Horcrux extraction spell. The animagus transformation and the other distractions in the form of Umbridge and the Giants had railroaded his attempts to create a new spell. With most of his time spent on other avenues for the last couple of months, Harry was determined to shift the focus back to the Horcrux problem for the rest of the holidays.

When morning came knocking, Harry revived Tonks from her potion-induced sleep just as he promised.

"You all right there, Tonks?" Harry asked in concern, seeing a red nose and pink eyes on his supposed babysitter sitting across from him on the table.

"I'll be all right. I think." Tonks muttered, nursing the warm cup of tea in her hands.

"Maybe you should lie down and take the day off. I could draft a letter for you requesting for leave and have Kreacher deliver it to the Head Auror." Harry offered.

"No. The department is understaffed, and with a crisis going on..." Tonks trailed off.

She suddenly sat up straight, looking around in panic.

"Did you get this morning's Prophet?" Tonks asked in a hurry.

"I'm afraid not. Grimmauld Place is under wards, remember. Owls won't be able to track us down. Kreacher usually picks up the Prophet from Diagon Alley."

"Then, I'll have to go. Sorry, Harry. Just take care of yourself, all right." Tonks shouted over her shoulder while rushing towards the door.

Harry sat at the table, taking slow sips of a mug of strong coffee.

"Good talk." Harry raised the cup mockingly towards the empty seat.

He was sure it was not just Tonks or the Ministry with their butts on fire after yesterday. It was an excellent thought that his enemies were running around with their butts on fire. Harry snickered as his mind conjured up the images of Dumbledore and Voldemort running around with their butts on fire. It was a shame there was no chance that he could witness their reactions with his own eyes.

"Kreacher. Go bring me the Prophet."

Voldemort could not help but be merry at the moment. Despite the failures he faced in unearthing the secrets of the Prophecy that eluded him, he was pretty happy. He stared at his most loyal Death Eaters with some fondness. These Death Eaters were his most devoted followers and most powerful fighters. Some of the most powerful wizards and witches had joined him in his quest to dismantle the corrupt Ministry of Magic and Dumbledore's traitorous muggle lovers. Some had died in his service, but those who survived were some of his most ferocious soldiers.

That was why he was happy to see them all before him.

"Welcome, my old friends. You've braved Azkaban and the passing of time for me. Despite all that has happened to you, my most faithful, I can see your loyalty remains unwavering."

"Of course, master. I've always believed you'd come for us." Bellatrix breathed out, her black eyes shining with utter devotion.

“We knew you’d never abandon us, my lord. There were those who believed you were gone. But we have seen your power, my lord. We would never doubt the power of our lord who defeated the clutches of death.” Rabastan Lestrangle rasped.

“Ah, Bella, Rabastan. I’ve missed this, my most loyal followers. This confidence has been lacking in many of my Death eaters. With your presence, I hope they learn to emulate your faith in my power.” Voldemort gleefully said, eyeing the new recruits with a sneer.

“My lord.”

Voldemort’s attention came back to Augustus Rookwood.

“Ah, Augustus. Lord Voldemort shall require your services most urgently. I’ve made sure to ensure all of your speedy recovery. Once you have regained your former power, you shall take your rightful place by my side, my most faithful. Our work remains unfinished. Blood traitors and mudbloods must be culled to save our world from their rot.”

“Oh, my master. I remain ever faithful and most obedient. All that I know and all that I have is at your disposal.” Augustus Rookwood crawled on his knees and kissed Voldemort’s feet.

“I know, Rookwood. Lord Voldemort does not forget his loyal servants. You shall be rewarded for your loyalty. When we reclaim our world, you shall be by my side as we reimagine the wizarding world in our image.”

“Now...” Voldemort paused as the doors to his chambers were abruptly opened.

He’d have cursed the offender for disturbing him, but Voldemort saw it was Lucius Malfoy.

“My lord. There has been an incident that requires your immediate attention.” Lucius claimed, his eyes darting around at the Death Eaters surrounding the hall.

“Leave us.” Voldemort commanded, his red eyes bore into the newly recruited Death Eaters, causing them to leave the hall’s premises immediately.

“We shall speak soon, my most faithful. First, you must recover your strength.” Voldemort said, staring at the recently jailbroken Death Eaters.

Voldemort waited patiently as his most faithful Death Eaters like Rabastan Lestrangle, Bellatrix Lestrangle, Rodolphus Lestrangle, Antonin Dolohov, Augustus Rookwood, Thorfinn Rowle, Mulciber, Gibbon, Jugson and Travers were escorted out by the healers.

“What is it, Lucius?” Voldemort turned his attention to his chief informant inside the Ministry.

“My lord, the Ministry is in an uproar.”

Voldemort scoffed, cutting off whatever Lucius Malfoy was going to say.

“Of course, they are in an uproar. Is this why you disturbed me, Lucius?” Voldemort asked in annoyance.

“I’m afraid not, my lord. While my lord has masterfully broken out his Death Eaters from Azkaban, there has been another attack.”

“Another attack?” Voldemort frowned.

“Yes, my master. The Giants were attacked at Yr Wyddfa.” Lucius said.

“What?” Voldemort hissed, making Lucius pale at the rage he saw in the blazing red eyes of his master.

“Yes, my lord.” Lucius gulped. “I just received word from the Ministry. The aurors were called into the scene when the muggles came across the burnt camp of the Giants. I’m afraid twelve Death Eaters stationed at the camp were killed, my lord. Their bodies have been recovered with your mark visible on their forearms.”

Voldemort stared long and hard at Lucius, who cowered in fright, keeping his eyes low on the floor. Letting out a yell. Voldemort brandished his wand and fired a blasting curse at the hall’s roof. The spell’s power was such that it disintegrated the entire roof into dust. However, the blowback from the curse was equally damaging to Voldemort, who clutched his wand hand in pain. He could see the veins on his hand bulge underneath the skin with a black tar-like substance slowly leaking out.

“Potter! It was Potter. I’m sure of it.” Voldemort snarled, falling back into his throne while hiding his pain and blackened veins underneath his black robes.

“Perhaps, it was Dumbledore, my lord.” Lucius said tenderly, trying his best to stay safe from the debris falling from the roof.

“No! Dumbledore is many things, but he has no stomach for killing. Or Snape is not as useful as a spy as I thought.” Voldemort growled, tightly gripping the arms of his throne while rage bubbled in his mind.

Once again, Voldemort was confronted with the fact that he desperately needed to know the prophecy. Without knowing the full scope of the prophecy, he was fighting against a foe with his eyes blinded to the future. He was sure the rest of the prophecy held some clue to defeat the Potter boy. He could not think of any other reason why Harry Potter was escaping him time after time and dealing blows that were far more damaging to his cause than even Dumbledore. Just as he was celebrating the return of his most loyal Death Eaters and the Dementors, Harry Potter struck at his allies among the Giants and killed off a dozen newly recruited Death Eaters.

His eyes found movement at the entrance of the hall. It turned out to be none other than Snape.

“Come, Severus. You have much explaining to do.” Voldemort glowered coldly, making the Potion Master freeze.

“The Dark Lord thinks Harry attacked the Giants allied to his cause?” Dumbledore asked incredulously.

When asked like that, even Severus found it challenging to comprehend why the Dark Lord would think so.

“Not just the Giants. The Dark Lord believes Potter killed twelve of his Death Eaters camping near the Giants.” Snape said, shaking his head at the strange tangent the Dark Lord had taken in recent months.

He had noticed that the Dark Lord was increasingly paranoid. Severus had at first attributed this paranoia to the difficulties the Dark Lord was facing after the shoddy ritual that restored the body of the Dark Lord. But lately, he came to realise that the Dark Lord was constantly living in fear of Potter. The desperate attempts to steal the Prophecy orb from the Department of Mysteries and the recurring rants filled with hate against Potter showed that the Dark Lord was increasingly becoming fearful of Harry Potter.

To a certain extent, Severus conceded that the Potter boy was becoming a competent wizard. The boy had stopped lazing off and started applying himself in potions class. There was a marked difference in quality in the boy’s potions since last year. It had also not escaped his notice that Potter was getting better with wand-based magic. The magical skills Potter showed off during the Tournament last year and against the aurors a few weeks back were a testament to the boy’s growth.

Having said that, the irrational fear that had consumed the Dark Lord was strange. Severus was increasingly becoming convinced that Potter had some hand in the deaths of the Death Eaters during the Dark Lord’s resurrection. He was even starting to doubt Potter had somehow botched up the reviving ritual the Dark Lord conducted to acquire a physical form. Unfortunately, he could not confirm his doubts as Lucius and the Dark Lord refused to share any details of that night.

“Why is Tom blaming Harry? Has his obsession with the Prophecy blinded him so much?” Dumbledore asked, looking gravely at Snape.

“Most likely.” Severus muttered, keeping his doubts to himself.

It was not like Dumbledore would believe a word he would say about Potter. Even if he accused Potter had a hand in the recent attack, he could not prove it with any substantial evidence. According to Nymphadora Tonks, Potter was supposedly in France with Black. And even if Potter were in Britain, the monitoring charms of the Ministry would trigger if Potter were to use magic outside any warded area.

“Severus. Could it be possible that someone with a grudge against Tom is hunting down his Death Eaters and allies?” Dumbledore asked.

“It’s possible.” Severus agreed with a nod.

But he doubted someone like that could be as resourceful enough to know sensitive information like the location of the Giants or even the location of the Dark Lord's resurrection. Such thought only gave him more headache instead of answers.

"The Dark Lord is now adamant about claiming the Prophecy orb. Augustus Rookwood will soon share the crucial information the Dark Lord needs to remove the orb from the shelf. Once that happens, the Dark Lord will either storm the Department of Mysteries to take possession of the orb or manipulate Potter to take it for him." Severus said.

"Then it falls to us to ensure the orb remains out of Voldemort's reach." Said Dumbledore.

'That's easier said than done.' Severus thought, considering Dumbledore's insistence on not using Potter to remove the orb and put a fake one on the shelf.

It was a perfectly reasonable plan, but Dumbledore stubbornly refused to involve Potter for some inane reason that remained unknown to Severus.

Daphne giggled as she tried to stay on her feet while holding Harry's hand. It was a challenge to stay on her feet without falling on her ass, cold air rushing past her as they glided through the frozen floor.

"Wooo..." Daphne squealed as Harry swept her off her feet and spun around on the ice.

She had to be extra careful on the touchdown as her skating skills were non-existent. Harry held on to her waist, which was a blessing as she remained on her feet despite the wobble that she felt on her feet.

"Are you having fun?" Harry asked, his green eyes glinting under the light of the evening sun.

"I thought I'd be bored out of my mind, but I've got to admit this is turning out to be an enjoyable evening." Daphne admitted.

She had very low expectations when she agreed to a date with Harry in the muggle world. Still, he continued to surprise her by making it an enjoyable evening despite her preconceived notions about the muggle world.

She had to admit Harry was quite an expert in finding out her interests. She liked old castles and secret chambers quite a lot. That was why she loved their date in the fabled secret chamber of Salazar Slytherin and the many old muggle castles she got to visit today. On the other hand, ice skating was not something she had ever done, but clearly, it was a fun activity.

"What're you thinking?" Harry asked as they glided through the ice at a slow pace.

"I was just thinking about adding an ice rink back home. Although, my mother might not particularly like the idea of anything muggle in our home." said Daphne.

“Hmm. Your ballroom could be refitted into a temporary ice rink. Or, I could add one to the home I’m building, and you could use it whenever you fancy.”

“You’re building a home?” Daphne asked in surprise.

“Yes. I’ll be restoring the Potter manor that was burned down by the Dark Lord. I’ll be finalising the contract tomorrow. I could add an ice rink adjacent to the ballroom if you like it so much.”

Hearing Harry’s proposal to build something for her, Daphne's heart fluttered momentarily. Without thinking, she hugged Harry, causing them to lose balance. Together they fell on the ice and skidded across the floor. Daphne ended up being on top of Harry, and she held onto his jacket for dear life. Thankfully, they didn’t get injured while some muggles around them laughed at their misfortune. She was quite embarrassed, but Harry laughed, finding their situation funny. When they tried to get up, her tie got stuck with Harry’s belt, which only furthered her embarrassment.

“I told you wearing a white shirt and tie with a skirt is not exactly a good attire for the date during winter.” Harry said in between snickers at her expense.

“I also had a coat.” Daphne argued, her cheeks becoming flushed with embarrassment.

“Besides, I didn’t have that many muggle clothes to wear anyway.”

“In that case, I’ll take you shopping.” Harry offered.

Daphne forgot her embarrassment at the offer.

“All right.” she immediately agreed, already making plans to make the best out of the situation. “But first, you must remove your hand, Harry.”

Daphne looked at Harry’s right hand that was holding her just under her breast.

“My hand will stay there until you remove that stupid tie from my belt buckle.” Harry said, giving her a playful wink.

“You...” Daphne sighed in exasperation and decked Harry on his head, but she allowed his hand to stay there until she managed to dislodge her tie.

“You’ll be regretting that soon.” Daphne threatened, and she followed with that threat when Harry took her shopping.

When the date night came to an end, it was safe to say she came to own enough muggle clothes to last a lifetime, provided she could use certain charms on them to adjust their size and longevity. What she didn't like was the red Christmas cap Harry insisted she put on her head throughout the night. Harry claimed it was to blend in, but she had her doubts.